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Message of Terror

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Message of Terror

by Eileen Mericle

PARTS of it I remember clearly. I was waiting in the checkout line of the supermarket when I saw the boy run in. I thought he was drunk at first or maybe ill. He hurried down the outside aisle past the counters. "Is he having a convulsion?" I wondered. There was something in his manner that set the chill hands of confusion to my brain. When he had come a good way he stopped, cupped a hand to his mouth and shouted, "THEY'VE DROPPED A BOMB!"

A bomb! The words froze us all into a picture of shocked immobility. Cash registers whirled their last figures and stopped. All eyes turned toward the boy in blue jeans. He slumped against the window ledge. I don't know how long we stood that way, but suddenly the store manager approached the youth. Just as he drew near enough to talk to him, the intruder jumped to his feet and shouted again, "Don't any of you understand? We're at war!" His eyes were luminous now. His voice beseeched us, "For the sake of your souls pray — repent!" He set a portable radio on the counter and turned on the volume full strength. There was some static but the words came through — hideous words, terrify-

ing words. A near-frantic newscaster was describing the devastation. . . "They've bombed Washington, Chicago, New York, and Nebraska. . ."

I heard no more. My mind became an avalanche of disconnected thought. "Have to get home. . . call Tom. . . get food. . ." There was no order, no pause. The manager watched helplessly as people began to stir. Some women rushed for the door, others began throwing frozen food out of their carts and grabbing for canned goods.

I tried to think. "What will be most useful? Powdered milk — I must get some powdered milk. . . never bought any before, what shelf. . .?" Frantically I too rushed down the aisle. "No time to talk to anyone; no one fit to answer." I scooped off a row of tuna cans into my basket and grabbed a bag of flour. "SALT! Salty things won't spoil!" Oh, God, if only there were time to think. What would we need to live on? What would last and for how long? Canned goods — but what kind. . .?"

Young children who could only sense the mood of disaster were strangely silent. An old lady, using her shopping cart for support, knelt down to pray. Men were calling for their wives, and women for their children. People were rushing out of doors with full shopping carts. I grabbed what I could and ran myself. "Better to get home with something. . . anything. . ."

Outside, people were frantically dumping bags of foods into the trunks of their cars. A woman had fainted or been hit and someone was carrying her out of the driveway. Quickly I threw the groceries into the back seat and then, sick with horror, realized that I had lost my purse with the car keys! Feverishly I clawed through the litter of cans and packages, and then dashed back to the store.

The manager was shouting and waving his hands as I came in again but I couldn't hear him, nor did I care to. I saw my purse on the counter, snatched it, and turned to go, but just then the loudspeaker on the wall above us boomed out, "THERE IS NO WAR!" It wasted no time on trivial words but repeated with firmness, "There is no war!" Three grocery clerks with sticks formed a row in front of the shattered glass doors, blocking both entrance and exit. Two

others held the thin boy with the portable radio. Several people were still running around, but most of us stood waiting for the voice to continue.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it was all a hoax. No bombs have been dropped." The echoes of the loudspeaker were punctuated now by the howling of children. "Please wait quietly until the police arrive."

Some I could see were still apprehensive, others just bewildered, but I believed the voice on the microphone — I wanted to believe it. Everything around me began to glitter. I realized I was crying. A few couples were embracing each other. Mothers bent to comfort their children. My eyes sought out the boy with the radio. He looked at no one. His eyes studied only the checkered linoleum as he clasped and unclasped his hands nervously. I think he was crying too — silently. "Why, he can't be more than eighteen!" I thought with surprise.

From far down the street came the echo of fluctuating sirens. Soon two black cars pulled up outside. People were beginning to leave now but there was no hurry; the parking lot was hopelessly jammed.

Slowly I edged over to where they were questioning the boy. Someone had pulled the radio apart to reveal a tape recorder. As I passed by I caught a part of his story. "... thought it would make them more religious. . . didn't know people. . . hurt. . . sorry. . ."

"SORRY!" The word reverberated within me as I walked down the street toward home.